

**Chicken Tikka Masala Multiculturalism: The United Kingdom's Continuation of Past**

**Colonial Practices**

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Abstract:

Chicken tikka masala is a dish in the United Kingdom that is consumed by millions each year. In 2000, the former Foreign Secretary Robin Cook declared that it was the national dish of the United Kingdom which has led to a two billion dollar industry and chicken tikka multiculturalism. This type of multiculturalism is discussed by scholars such as Amir Ali. Chicken tikka masala has been declared as the national dish of the United Kingdom since 2001 when the former British This South Asian dish has a rich history and a heavy influence in the UK, which has led to “chicken tikka multiculturalism” which was made to accept the growing South Asian populations and address the anti-Asian sentiment. Chicken tikka multiculturalism is used by scholars who address a diverse and unique movement in the United Kingdom to explain the adoption of a foreign dish and a multicultural society. This ethnic dish has been claimed by the United Kingdom as their own, but as many South Asians argue, the true roots go back to India. While the United Kingdom has benefited financially from the adoption of this dish, South Asian Britons remain to be the most deprived in the country and experience hate crimes to this day. The United Kingdom has declared themselves as a beacon of multiculturalism, but solely takes one aspect of South Asian culture while rejecting the South Asian individuals.

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## Introduction

Robin Cook, the foreign secretary of the United Kingdom in 2001 in a speech said, “Chicken Tikka Massala is now a true British national dish, not only because it is the most popular, but because it is a perfect illustration of the way Britain absorbs and adapts external influences. Chicken Tikka is an Indian dish. The Massala sauce was added to satisfy the desire of British people to have their meat served in gravy. Coming to terms with multiculturalism as a positive force for our economy and society will have significant implications for our understanding of Britishness” (The Guardian). Years later, chicken tikka masala is found in nearly every city and found in almost all grocery stores. White Britons argue that this is a celebration of converging identities, while South Asian Britons argue that the declaration of chicken tikka masala as the national dish is performative multiculturalism and a form of cultural appropriation. Scholars have demonstrated that South Asians have been economically and socially disadvantaged, while chicken tikka masala is being made and sold by white men and segregation is rampant in the UK.

My work aligns with the work of the group of scholars who argue that British policies of multiculturalism are performative and the group of scholars who state that chicken tikka masala is indeed a form of cultural appropriation. It aligns with both of the main arguments that the United Kingdom government is being performative in nature and the application of multicultural policies along with the adoption of chicken tikka masala has hurt the British South Asian community. I will explore the declaration of chicken tikka masala as the national dish of the UK and demonstrate that it is a form of performative multiculturalism and a form of cultural appropriation by presenting statistics on the status of the South Asian community in the UK,

present hate crime statistics and analyze the dialogue using discourse analysis between SA Britons and White Britons.

It is estimated that there are 9,000 South Asian restaurants with 70,000 people working from South Asian descent (Basu 2004). Solely looking at the data from how these restaurants contribute to the economy, it is estimated that it is worth more than two billion dollars. Most grocery stores such as Sainsbury's, Waitrose, Aldi, Marks and Spencers and Iceland also carry chicken tikka style dishes, crackers, flavorings and this is not included in the two billion pound estimate. This South Asian dish has a rich history and a heavy influence in the UK, which has led to "chicken tikka multiculturalism" (Ali 2001). This concept is used by scholars who address a diverse and unique movement in the United Kingdom to explain the adoption of a foreign dish and a multicultural society. This ethnic dish has been claimed by the United Kingdom as their own, but as many South Asians argue, the true roots go back to India. This acceptance of the dish and other South Asian dishes were not accepted for decades until the Labour political party shifted their message after countless hate crimes and discrimination that South Asians experienced after migrating in large waves after the British left India (Buettner 2008). The British colonial presence led to millions dying, led to wars, a genocide, Islamophobia and Hinduphobia in the region among many other issues which led to mass migration after the British left (Fish 1997). Today, South Asians, specifically Pakistanis, Indians and Bengalis, make up 7.5% of the United Kingdom population which makes them the largest ethnic minority group in Britain (Rusi 2015).

As there were large waves of South Asians migrating, they faced discrimination, inadequate housing, low wages, and unable to access quality education. This was true for the migrants who came in the 40s and this trend continues today. While there have been some

improvements, South Asians remain the poorest in the United Kingdom despite the generations that have passed. But while generations have gone by, the white Britons have enjoyed and adaption certain aspects of South Asian culture such as food. While South Asian dishes such as chicken tikka masala once was avoided by the British elite, today it represents British culture. And as many politicians hold, this dish represents a multicultural society and proves how welcoming the British are to immigrants. While many white British residents enjoy this dish and see chicken tikka masala as a staple to their society, South Asians today argue that this is a form of cultural appropriation.

Scholars such as Wenying Xu, Michael Dietler, Peter Balint, and Patti Lenard examine different cultures and argue how some Eurocentric cultures appropriate foods or traditions of ethnic minorities. They state that some of the reasons that this may occur is due to demonstrate how a nation is accepting and multicultural, while also benefiting financially. The scholars that speak to British multiculturalism argue how Britain's adoption may be for political and multicultural purposes. In addition to these scholars, I look at another set of scholarly work focused on British multiculturalism policies. I will speak about culturally appropriation, but argue that because South Asians continue to face economic and social deprivation, the adoption of this dish that was meant to celebrate the South Asians was an policy that ignored the real problem.

I will discuss the reasons why the adoption of chicken tikka masala as the national dish of the United Kingdom is a form of performative multiculturalism, cultural appropriation and an extension of colonialism by presenting tweets and statistics of the make-up of the United Kingdom and then I will dissect this data by analyzing the conversations and numbers in order to

show how divided the United Kingdom is and how the adoption of this dish is only the acceptance of South Asian food and not the group of people the dish comes from.

Overall, this thesis will be organized by a context section, a literature review, a methodology section and a data section. The context section will bring attention to the past of chicken tikka masala, address partition and past colonialism and elaborate how South Asians are deprived in their own country. The literature review will serve as a bridge between the literature on cultural appropriation and how British policies of multiculturalism have harmed South Asians. There cannot be an argument about cultural appropriation unless there is a discussion on British multiculturalism policies since many of these policies pertain to economic and social status of South Asians. The methodology section will layout the process of the data collection and the data section will demonstrate the inequality and the debate surrounding chicken tikka masala among the British public.

Chicken tikka masala has been used by the United Kingdom government and declared by its citizens to be their national dish. Some say the reason for this is because the dish originated in Britain, but South Asians argue that this dish originated in South Asia, not Britain. Since the adoption of this dish, Britain has been able to declare how multicultural they are as a nation, yet they neglect the very population that this dish comes from. They accept this dish along with South Asian food with open arms, yet, throughout the decades, have rejected and neglected the South Asian population that arguably is a big chunk of the population. Cultural appreciation is the admiration for a culture, but appropriation is when a type of clothing, food or any other part of a culture is claimed by another group of people that it does not belong to. Here, in this case, Britain is claiming this dish as its own, reaping the economic and social benefits, but the government and its white citizens turn a blind eye to the millions of British South Asians. By

declaring chicken tikka masala as its national dish, the United Kingdom is appropriating this dish and is continuing their traditional practice of colonialism.

### **History of Chicken Tikka Masala**

Chicken tikka masala is a South Asian curry eaten by millions of people around the world. The chicken is drenched in an orange and creamy sauce that is usually eaten with naan or over a bed of white rice. The origin of this popular dish has long been debated. Some say that it originated in the kitchen of a Bangladeshi chef in Scotland, but most say it originated in northern India well before South Asians immigrated to the United Kingdom in large waves before the 1960s (BBC). Chicken tikka masala was declared the national dish in 2001 when the former British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook gave a speech naming chicken tikka masala a symbol of modern multicultural Britain. He then elaborated to say that while chicken tikka is an Indian dish, the gravy or more commonly known in the South Asian community as “salaan” was added to “satisfy the desire of British people to have their meat in gravy” (The Guardian). Essentially, Cook stated that the “gravy” part of the dish also known as the actual “curry” was created for the British. But did the South Asian community adjust their traditional dish to make it more suitable for the “white man?” While many popular accounts say yes, many unheard South Asian scholars say that chicken tikka masala originated solely in India. Adding to this confusion UK politicians call for Glasgow to be listed as the home of chicken tikka masala because they believe that by housing the creation of this dish, Glasgow can be the city where a new wave of multicultural policies began. (Highmore 2009, 180).

In 2001, Robin Cook in his speech stated how Britain “absorbs and adapts external influences” while speaking on the changing multicultural environment due to the influx of



South Asian immigration (The Guardian). But in the context of the speech, a nation absorbing and adapting external influence is cultural appropriation. Many South Asian restaurants and South Asian Britons have criticized the lack of authenticity of the food and how these “curry houses” simply cater to the white British and how they expect chicken tikka masala or other South Asian dishes to taste (Buettner 2008, 871). Amongst all this confusion and debate, there is conversation about whether or not this chicken tikka masala multiculturalism is truly authentic or simply a form of cultural appropriation (Highmore 2009 176). The debate is regarding whether or not chicken tikka masala is a form of cultural appropriation, but there are also ongoing conversations of the origin of the dish that makes it difficult to reach a clear answer.

As Buettner argues, calling chicken tikka masala a true British national dish brings up the idea that this dish has been “possessed” by Britain, not adapted or a true appreciation for the cultures that have entered London (2008 870). Possessing a dish/item of clothing/culture is when an aspect of culture is “cherry picked” while appreciating a culture or custom is fully understanding the significance and learning about the people who are from a certain culture (Highmore 2009). Chicken tikka masala among other South Asian dishes are marketed throughout London and the rest of the UK as being a great representation of the South Asian population and their culture, yet most dishes consumed at these ethnic restaurants are not the same food that South Asians are eating (Buettner 869 2008). While Indians were in Britain pre-partition, they consisted of such a small number of the population that their impact was very little in comparison to the increase after the Indian partition in 1947 (Buettner 866 2008).

### **Partition and Past Colonial History**

The history of the United Kingdom's colonization and involvement in partition is one that spans more than a century (Aiyar 2007). After being controlled by the British for decades, India wanted to gain independence (Sherwani 1989). Since there were religious conflicts between Hindus and Muslims which arguably was created by the British empire, there was later the creation of East and West Pakistan and India (Sherwani 1989). Since the United Kingdom so abruptly divided the land in the creation of two nations catering to two religious groups, this led to mass migration and murder (Aiyar 2007). All Muslims had to mass migrate to Pakistan and all Hindus had to migrate to India. This mass migration led to the murder and raping of almost 200,000-two million individuals (Aiyar 2007). The number of people who were severely impacted by the abrupt partition orchestrated by the United Kingdom has not been correctly accounted for, but due to the violence and division among the various ethnic and religious groups in the South Asian region, there was mass migration to other countries, including the United Kingdom. Due to the lack of care and meticulous planning from the UK officials, this has led to continuous conflict in the South Asian region and a similar division in the United Kingdom today (Datta 2002).

Before British rule in the Indian subcontinent ended, South Asian food was not that common in the UK, but there were a few restaurants (Buettner 2008 872). These restaurants were for the British elites where they had "natives" from the sub-continent serve them, but it was not common. And while there was curry powder sold throughout pre-Partition, it was not widely loved in comparison to today. In 1955, shortly after the partition, a British author wrote that Indian food was "impression, difficult to eradicate, that curry eating is bad for you; that it causes dyspepsia, makes you evil-tempered and tends to shorten your life" (Buettner 2008 874). Sentiment towards South Asian food was still poor during this time after many migrants

flooded to the United Kingdom. This author, whose books were well known and read, later in the 1960s claimed that “Indian cooks are dirty” blatantly spewing racist remarks (Buettner 2008 874).

This sort of sentiment was continued throughout the later decades, which led South Asians to be called “smelly” and “dirty” throughout the United Kingdom and was echoed in media (Buettner 2008, 877). And while today these words are still used to describe South Asians, there is more interest in eating curries such as chicken tikka masala because it is seen as “exotic” (Buettner 2008, 880). These curry houses are mostly in areas such as Tower Hamlets and Bethnal Green which both are home to the highest working-class Bangladeshi population. These curry houses with their incredibly low prices attract customers from all around London and while at the same time they are eating these curries, they are also ridiculing the neighborhoods they are within (Buettner 2008, 885). While South Asians around Britain have struggled to find work, some have decided to open up their own curry houses. While they are being hurt by the current culture and adoption of the dish, some South Asians have taken the opportunity to own these curry houses in order to gain some economic prosperity. But these curry houses--owned by South Asians or not---in the United Kingdom are known for having low prices and paying low wages which is one way South Asians are economically exploited (Glynn 2010).

### **The South Asian Community in London**

Today in London, there is the similar “divide and rule” mentality that was used during colonization in British India (Amir 2001 2822). Because of the continuation of this mentality, multiculturalism in London today is similar to British India’s model of multiculturalism, which was divided and marked by inequalities (Amir 2001). One of London’s

neighborhoods, Tower Hamlets has the highest concentration of Bengalis and is also in the poorest borough of London (Jaspal 2015). This borough is mostly populated by unskilled South Asian migrant workers. Because of this economic disadvantage, Bengalis in Tower Hamlets are constantly struggling to make ends meet and find themselves living in the same run-down flats for decades (Glynn 2010). While for decades Cook and many other politicians tote the fact that chicken tikka masala is the perfect example of how advanced and welcoming Britain is, the evident living circumstances for South Asians demonstrate while South Asian food has been welcomed with open arms, South Asian individuals are disregarded.

Former Foreign Secretary Cook claimed that the United Kingdom is a national accepting of its new multicultural society. But in reality, over time South Asian food has become accepted while the people and other aspects of the culture have not. In fact, South Asians remain to be the poorest, least educated group and experience racism in the United Kingdom. As curry houses are becoming more popular, this embracement of South Asian culture by the UK government and white Britons is not genuine. While there is still debate as to where chicken tikka masala has come from, the most important point in answering whether chicken tikka masala is a form of cultural appropriation is by understanding the complexities of the South Asian population in England (Buettner 2008). Boroughs such as Tower Hamlets are now known as “Curry Capitals”. Tower Hamlets has the largest Bangladeshi population and is also the poorest borough in London (UK Government Borough Profile 2018). There is more emphasis and care for the profit that comes from these restaurants versus acknowledging and accepting those who had created it (Buettner 2008). A lot of the time as well, these restaurants have been run by “white” owners and white Britons are the ones who eat at these restaurants the most.

Chicken tikka masala remains to be one of the most popular dishes in Britain. Most Britons believe that it is an important staple into their diets, but does this prove that the UK is a welcoming country for migrants? Has Britain shifted from their past colonial practices in “appreciating” this dish? That Britain and its white citizens accept the cultures and people from other nations? Yes, there are curry houses all around London and throughout the United Kingdom, but the British South Asian community continues to be neglected and unaccepted. They remain segregated, ridiculed, socially, and financially worse off in comparison to all other races and ethnicities in the United Kingdom (United Kingdom Race Disparity Report 2017). The familiarity with chicken tikka masala does not prove that the UK is a multicultural society and many politicians including Robin Cook lack acknowledging the true circumstances of the South Asian population.

William Shankley, Tina Hannemann, and Simpson Ludi in *The Demography of Ethnic Minorities in Britain* look at the ethnic minorities of Britain in order then assess the wellbeing of these groups. As argued by these three co-authors, Britain’s ethnic minority has been shaped by the past imperial history (Shankley et. al 2020; Pandey 1997). The British after the partition, in order to attract South Asians for cheap labor, then created policies inviting those from Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh (Pandey 1997). This was touched on by Patrick Sturgis, Ian Brunton-Smith, Jouni Kuha, and Jonathan Jackson in *Ethnic diversity, segregation, and the social cohesion of neighbourhoods in London*. But while policies were inviting South Asian migrants, there was also a rise in racism. Until very recently, in the 2000s, there was a shift in attitude and a “welcoming” of those from different nations. Multiple scholars draw from past British policies and discuss the effect it has had on the South Asian community. And they go further to argue that British policies both from the Conservative party and Labour party have

created discriminatory laws directed towards South Asians (Sturgis et. al 2014). As they state, David Cameron's belief that multiculturalism has failed and the policies of Britain have demonstrated that Britain's politicians have not created true multicultural policies, but instead segregate South Asians into their particular neighborhoods (Sturgis 2014 et. al). These South Asians due to British policies remain in the poorest neighborhoods and still have the highest illiteracy rates (Sturgis et. al 2014).

The roots of the current day segregation in the United Kingdom are found in partition. To this day, South Asians remain segregated, disadvantaged, and ignored by the government. William Shankley and Nissa Finney in *Ethnic Minorities and Housing in Britain* discuss British policies that have contributed to the South Asian struggle decades after migrating. He emphasizes that policies in the United Kingdom, specifically in London have excluded South Asians stating, "Housing law, systems, and practices create disadvantage for minorities and migrants in the UK: (1) Practices of discrimination and racism exist in housing, for example in restricting ethnic minority households from entering specific housing tenures in Britain" (Shankley and Finney 2020 149). Multicultural policies consist of immigration, literacy, education, housing among various other policies. This housing policy mentioned by Shankley is one example, but it highlights how South Asians in Britain due to policies, are forced to live in run-down homes in low-income neighborhoods. It is no coincidence that the areas that are the most impoverished, have the highest South Asian population. Petros Petsimeris gathered data on how the British South Asian community is located to demonstrate the heavy concentration of South Asians in certain neighborhoods, which in fact, are the poorest (1998). In his study, he concluded that British quota housing policies that Shankley mentioned in certain neighborhoods

and high prices are what have led to segregation in London (Petsimeris 1998; Shankley and Finney 2020).

Shankley and Finney also point out that although there have been calls from South Asian groups for better housing, there was not much progress until the 2000s. As these scholars address, while Parliament has addressed and changed certain discriminatory laws, South Asians remain economically oppressed and unable to navigate a complex system (Shankley et. al 2020). Something that these scholars point to, that many others do not, is that many of these South Asians came after the time of partition due to heavy violence and did not have legal status. This trend continues today because of the growing violence in Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh, making it difficult for more South Asians to overcome these set of challenges (Shankley et. al 2020). These scholars speak to how policies not only affected the way South Asians received housing but also their socio-economic status.

After the time of partition to present day, South Asians in the United Kingdom remain to have the lowest education rates and lowest salaries (Wills, May, Datta, Evans, Herbert, Mcilwaine 2009). As these authors explain, immigration policies have allowed South Asians to find work, but their cheap labor is exploited (Willis et.al 2009). They get the least desirable jobs due to desperation and are paid very low wages (Willis et. Al 2009). The British government recognized how South Asians were exploited, but to address this, they restricted immigration to accepting highly educated individuals (Wadsworth 2010; Jaspal 2015). But this has not addressed the issue that former generations face from accessing adequate work conditions or fair wages. These two issues--of finding a good job and having a fair wage-- affects their ability to afford housing in Britain and seek higher education (Shankley and Finney 2020). This shows true today as Glynn writes in *Playing the Ethnic Card: Politics and Segregation in London's*

*East End* where Bangladeshis today who have resided in the UK for decades remain impoverished throughout generations and are unable to succeed due to lack of resources and attention from the British government (Glynn 2010). This point is also emphasized by Stephen Small and John Solomos in *Race, Immigration and Politics in Britain* where they analyze methods of how the British treat South Asians and how there is a stark similarity to the methods that were used during the times of the partition. As Datta spoke to the British's methods during partition divided by small ethnic groups, legislation targeting South Asians mirrored this past colonial action (Small 2006; Pandey 1997). British policies were created to divide South Asians and this occurred while the British controlled India and has lasted today where policy is still created on the ethnic division.

Bengalis first migrated to Britain during the early 1950s after the partition (Pandey 1997). Because many Bengalis under British India were working for the Empire's merchant navy, they had the opportunity to jump off the ship and settle near the docks in the UK (Glynn 2010, 994). Because many of these migrants were uneducated, they had to work in unskilled jobs in the garment, catering, railway, and factory industries (Glynn 2010). Then, as these migrants began were able to bring over their families to London, there was a huge boom in the Bengali population in London, but specifically in the East End. This led to more white English families moving north of Britain to avoid the growing South Asian population (Glynn 2010, 995). The influx of South Asian migrants and the exodus of white English families created neighborhoods with high concentrations of Bengalis (Glynn 2010). Due to the poor economic status of many of these migrant families, since many of these families were struggling, they were able to receive council housing, which made it easier for these families to afford housing as well as create a comfortable environment around them because there were so many Bengali food shops, sari



shops, mosques and other ethnic stores that made the East End become the Bengali capital (Glynn 2010, 991). But as these families settled in the UK for extended periods, they were still unable to escape poverty and depending on the government for housing. With the lack of investment from the government into these neighborhoods and to the education of these individuals, they have remained impoverished.

Bethnal Green is the area of London with the greatest number of people of Bangladeshi origin as well as the highest rate of child poverty at 54% as of 2020 (Glynn 2010). This area is 1/3 Bengali, and most of the working class lives there with relatively low-cost housing. Yet, there has been an increasing number of trendy stores and hipsters infiltrating the area and taking advantage of the relatively low-cost housing. This area is where Bengalis came to seek refuge from war that resulted from British involvement, and the British have now forced many South Asians to find a new home as Bethnal Green along with other neighborhoods are becoming gentrified (Glynn 2010). Petros Petsimeris conducted a study on social segregation throughout the city of London based on ethnicity. He compared different ethnic groups around London using a scale of segregation, with 100 meaning the ethnic group is facing the highest among of segregation, and 0 being the least (1998, 97). In 1991, Bangladeshis ranked in first place with 56 on the segregation index with Indians ranking second at 41 and third with Pakistanis at 40 (Petsimeris 1991, 98). Out of all of the ethnicities ranked, including White, Irish, Black Caribbean, Black African, and Chinese, the South Asian groups were ranked at the top in how much they are segregated throughout London (Petsimeris 1998). The higher the number on the index, the more segregated they are in the city. This study was conducted before the adoption of chicken tikka masala, but the neighborhoods where South Asians were segregated remain the same today.

In addition to this segregation index, there is also a dissimilarity index used to see how these groups fare in social status which is focused on their jobs (Petsimeris 1991 101). Whites were shown to have professional jobs at a much higher rate than South Asians regardless of what South Asian country was compared to the white population of London. The segregation and evident inequality relate to understanding chicken tikka multiculturalism because as scholars have argued, the lack of attention to the socio-economic problems is an example of cultural appropriation. While white Britons benefit from this two billion dollar industry, South Asians remain to be impoverished and are not truly accepted for their culture (Buettner 2008).

Every few years, the United Kingdom government conducts a Race Disparity Audit. As many of the scholars who speak about cultural appropriation articulate, the ethnic population where an aspect of culture may be taken and appropriated, will be situated in a weak and deprived position (Ali 2001, Dietler 2007; Xu 2008). The audit along with other statistical information supports the arguments made in the literature. The audit included all races and ethnicities in the United Kingdom along with various ages. The following information is from the October 2017 Audit conducted by the United Kingdom government. In an examination of which ethnic groups held the lowest skilled occupations, Bangladeshis and Pakistanis ranked the highest. These low-skilled jobs require little education and pay relatively little. Around 25% of children in households headed by South Asians were in persistent poverty in comparison to 7% of white children. Pakistani and Bangladeshi people were the most likely of all ethnic groups to live in the most deprived neighborhoods. These neighborhoods have low-quality housing, poor education, and fewer opportunities for those who may live in them. Looking at the income inequality, the United Kingdom government found that Pakistani and Bangladeshis received the lowest hourly pay (UK Race Disparity Audit 2017). These facts from this audit demonstrate how

impoverished the South Asian community is and they compare to various ethnic groups. It is baffling that the South Asian community remains to be the most deprived ethnic group and receives the least investment, while the United Kingdom has declared this dish as appreciation for the culture and people.

In addition to this audit, there are additional facts and figures that the United Kingdom government updates yearly. The following information is updated to include 2020 and early 2021. Out of all ethnic groups, Black, Bangladeshi, and Pakistani people have the highest unemployment rate (UK Government). Reports provided by the UK government show that 60% of Pakistani and Bangladeshis individuals live in low income households, making them the ethnic group to most likely live in low income households. Bangladeshis and Pakistanis also lead with the highest rates of overcrowding in their households, which stem from the lack of economic wealth that would allow for families to live on their own versus multiple families living in one home. White Britons devour chicken tikka masala along with many South Asian dishes in the name of celebrating the accomplishments and contributions made by the community, but the policies created neglect to truly care for those in the South Asian community who have been in extreme need for decades.

As Robin Cook, the former Foreign Secretary proudly declared, the adoption of this dish as the national dish was to demonstrate that it showed how united and open the country was to immigrants. But the adoption of the dish is the only sign of recognition that South Asians have received. Throughout the United Kingdom, South Asian Britons are attacked on the basis of their skin color and origin. They remain to be deprived in the very country that is supposed to be welcoming to them. The adoption of chicken tikka masala as the national dish has led to a two billion dollar industry which has helped the British economy. It has helped the British to change

their image of their cruel colonial past, but instead, their practices of neglect and division is simply a repetition of their old ways. Not only does the British South Asian community deal with social and economic hardship, but they endure hate crimes and ostracization.

### **“Paki”**

While white Britons eat curries all around the United Kingdom, every South Asian Briton is haunted by the word “paki.” One may see this and assume that it is a short version of saying Pakistani, but this seemingly simple word comes with a hateful past. For decades, the South Asian Britons have experienced racism, Islamophobia and “Paki Bashing.” The word Paki, short for Pakistani, is a slur to refer to those who are from South Asian countries. While Americans are unfamiliar with the significance of this word, the dark history related to the usage of its term has been likened to the N word. Paki in Urdu means “clean.” But for White Britons, they call South Asians “Paki” or “dirty Paki” in order to degrade and insult South Asians. This word has been seen on vandalized South Asian owned homes and restaurants, has been yelled and screamed during violent hate crimes and is said to children from their white Briton classmates (United Kingdom Hate Crime Statistics Report).

The United Kingdom Government maintains records year to year on hate crimes for the year. As indicated in the last report with data collected from 2019-2020, the most vulnerable racial group that suffered the most hate crimes in the UK are Muslims (United Kingdom 2019-2020 Report). Muslims are not a racial ethnicity, but since most South Asians located in the United Kingdom are Muslim, the data has intertwined both together (UK Government 2019-2020 report). But in another report that accounted for hate crimes from 2018 to the end of March 2020 found South Asians experienced the highest rate of hate crimes in the United Kingdom

(United Kingdom Hate Crime Statistics Report). These reports are posted on the United Kingdom Government page and the rate of hate crimes that South Asian Britons experience has not changed among the years. While South Asian dishes have been consumed widely throughout the United Kingdom, individuals who may consume these dishes, are also those who spew hate and are violent against South Asians and Muslims. The adoption of chicken tikka masala has not rectified the United Kingdom's past colonial history, nor has it been an effective way to shed light on the challenges the South Asian communities face.

Not only do South Asians remain economically and socially deprived with the lack of opportunities and growth within their respective communities, but they also constantly endure hate crimes. The Metropolitan Police Service which serves London put together a collective report recording the hate crimes that Muslims faced from 2005-2012. Many British South Asians are Muslims, and this report emphasizes the intersectionality of these identities. There was a deep dive analysis into the incidents recorded by the Metropolitan Police Service 2005-2012, and they examined hate speech during violent crimes. There were many firsthand accounts from victims of these hate crimes. The most recurring phrases yelled during hate crimes were: "we hate all you Pakis, we hate all you Muslims," "Paki...why are you Muslims here?" "dirty Paki terrorist," "You Paki! You Muslim! You terrorist!" While this report and most of these hate crimes were targeted towards those who appear to be Muslim, many South Asians--specifically Bangladeshis and Pakistanis--- are Muslim. Much of the anti-South Asian sentiment stems from Islamophobia and the dislike of immigrants. While the adoption of chicken tikka masala may have been in hopes of appreciating culture, this sentiment has not spread throughout the white Briton population.

In addition to the hate crimes that single individuals face, there are also a lot of curry shops that have been vandalized. A Bangladeshi-owned Indian restaurant was vandalized in 2019 with big letters saying “Paki” (Bangla Tribune). This attack came directly after the shooting in New Zealand where a white gunman killed over 50 Muslims. This hate attack was one example of many during this time as the police report also indicated higher rates of anti-Muslim and racist attacks. This vandalized restaurant has been around for 24 years and this is just one example out of hundreds. This Bangladeshi family moved to the United Kingdom in the 80s during one of the waves of immigration (Bangla Tribune). While the adoption of chicken tikka masala has been implemented to appreciate the mass waves of South Asians and their impact in the UK, it is evident that there is a clear backlash over the years of pushing multicultural policies and a lack of understanding of how British South Asians are situated in society.

## **Literature**

In situating the adoption of chicken tikka masala as the UK national dish as a form of cultural appropriation, it is crucial to understand the theory of cultural appropriation and how British multiculturalism policies have led to the appropriation. While discussing the adoption of this South Asian dish as a form of cultural appropriation, it is essential to note the reason it is appropriation is because of how South Asians have suffered economic and physical violence for centuries, and the adoption of this dish does not rectify the past. But cultural appropriation is essential to British multiculturalism nationalism, but what this does is erases the damages done by colonialism and ignores the socio-economic status of South Asian Britons today. Robin Cook declared this dish as the United Kingdom’s in order to unite the country. While this decision was not done with bad intentions, in doing so, this adoption while in hopes of appreciating the culture, does not address the issues that South Asians have faced.

There are key points as to what the difference is between appropriation and appreciation of a certain dish, item, or piece of clothing from a different culture other than one's own. To frame this thesis, there will be a look into how the United Kingdom adapted chicken tikka masala as their own dish and how it fits into the category that many scholars have agreed upon to be an example of cultural appropriation. There will be a discussion on three types of literature: cultural appropriation, whether chicken tikka masala is a form of cultural appropriation, and British policies of multiculturalism. Since these two subtopics are drastically different from one another, many of the scholars from each subsection do not speak to the same issues, but there is an important relationship between the two. In order to understand how declaring chicken tikka masala as the national dish of the United Kingdom is a form of cultural appropriation, it is necessary to understand the position of South Asians within the UK. As some scholars argue, segregation and alienation of the South Asians prove that declaring chicken tikka masala is a form of cultural appropriation (Balint and Lenard 2020; Dietler 2007). The United Kingdom government along with businesses have benefited financially from declaring their national dish, but the reality of South Asians is much different. By understanding the literature on how British policies have negatively affected South Asians, we are able to see how the adoption of chicken tikka masala is a form of cultural appropriation and the United Kingdom's extension of past colonial practices.

### *Cultural Appropriation*

Understanding the conversation surrounding cultural appropriation will help create an understanding of how chicken tikka masala is an example of cultural appropriation and how British multicultural policies led to this point. Michael Dietler in *Culinary Encounters: Food, Identity, and Colonialism* does not speak about chicken tikka masala directly but draws on many

other examples of how food has been appropriated and linked to colonialism. The author uses the term "alien" instead of "ethnic" to make it clear that these foods are not part of these nations, yet they somehow become "indigenized" by nations that the food has not originated from (Dietler 2007). Dietler speaks more to Native Americans and how the Europeans took Native American practices and claimed them as their own. He then adds to his argument that those who do adopt food from different cultures and call it their own, create an "embodied material culture" that is not truly theirs, but something to profit off of (Dietler 2007). A key point that addresses the reason and consequences of appropriation from the colonizers' side is,

"Given the importance of consumption in constructing social relationships, it should not be surprising that goods, including especially food, have not only been appropriated and indigenized, but they have also been used by both parties in colonial situations to attempt to control the other making subjects by means of objects. This involves not only attempts to create novel desires for new goods but also attempts to get people to use imported objects in particular ways, as well as the belief that the use of particular goods or technologies will inherently induce certain kinds of desired behavior" (Dietler 2007 228).

Dietler articulates so clearly that a colonial nation will take a new good and use this to induce a desired behavior which was the exact intention of adopting chicken tikka masala. Declaring this dish as the national dish was in hopes of creating a more inviting and open multicultural society so there would be more unity in the United Kingdom. In the United Kingdom, a predominantly white nation, holds control and they held control in the past during the colonization in India. "Eating" culture and using this to create a multicultural society is a view that many other scholars hold as well.

Wenying Xu agrees to this point in *Eating Identities* in her research focusing on American Asians. While she does not speak to South Asians, she notes that in America, Asian food has been "taken" from them and is popularly eaten in the United States (Xu 2008). Xu, similar to Dietler, expresses that food from foreign countries introduced to a white-dominated



country tends to be appropriated and made incorrectly (Xu 2020). For example, Xu notes that Chinese food that has been popularized in the United States is not in fact authentic. Xu and Dietler both agree that ethnic food consumption contributes to the construction of social relationships and that this in turn leads to the ethnic group being perceived as “less than” (Xu 2020). This idea directly connects to the central point of this argument, framing the adoption of chicken tikka masala as the national dish is a form of cultural appropriation which can be situated in examining British multicultural policies. This could be one explanation as to why in the United Kingdom South Asians have been segregated and neglected from society but chicken tikka masala as the national dish of the UK is touted to be a representation of a multicultural society. Dietler claims that the appropriation and adoption of ethnic food have led to a false sense of multiculturalism in majority-white nations (Dietler 2007). The points that Dietler and Xu make are essential to understanding the appropriation of ethnic foods and the “whitening” of the dish that is currently being done in the United Kingdom. While the main focus of this paper is to emphasize the economic inequality and ostracization of the community in order to demonstrate that the adoption of chicken tikka masala is a form of cultural appropriation, chicken tikka masala in the United Kingdom has been made unauthentically and “colonized” itself (Glynn 2010).

While Dietler and Xu speak about the link between ethnic foods and appropriation from nations that the food does not belong to, Peter Balint and Patti Lenard speak to how denying the prevalence of cultural appropriation is harmful to ethnic groups “In speaking to willingness to dismiss the claims made by minorities is consistent with the wave of anti-immigrant and anti-multicultural sentiment that is sweeping many democratic countries” (2020 334). These scholars argue that lack of understanding of what cultural appropriation is dismissing minority groups and

upholding racist tendencies (Balint and Lenard 2020). While this paper speaks more to cultural appropriation from a general view, it does connect to the scholarly discussion about British policies and how South Asians are segregated and ignored by the government. By ignoring what is an act of cultural appropriation instead of appreciation, as Balint and Lenard argue, minorities are being dismissed and their needs are unmet in democratic societies. This directly connects to the British policies because South Asians in Britain lack adequate housing, education, and career opportunities. While chicken tikka masala may be the national dish, they are being dismissed by the government and the British government has accepted some parts of their culture, but not welcomed them. Because Britain neglects the South Asian population but takes the one aspect of their culture--food--while dismissing the needs of this ethnic group. Their various other multicultural policies reflect this behavior and while the United Kingdom benefits from the two billion dollar industry, South Asians as a whole have not gained the benefits like white Britons have.

### *Multiculturalism in Britain*

The purpose of declaring chicken tikka masala as the national dish of the United Kingdom was to show that in a post 9/11 world where South Asian Britons were facing racism and Islamophobia, that they would be accepted and embraced. This adoption is an example of multicultural policy and for purposes of not straying too far from the thesis, multiculturalism will be discussed broadly without mention of specific policies. Multicultural policies include policies on language, education, immigration, and religious freedom. This discussion of Britain's "multiculturalism" usually references the demographics, but multiculturalism is a "succession of conscious efforts to make sense of, and manage, ethnically diverse communities at the local and national levels" (Buettner 2000 868). David Parker has termed the celebratory multiculturalism

which is the “coexistence and tension between ongoing racism and exclusion and the gradual, and conditional, development of enthusiastic appreciation.” The United Kingdom government has not been specific of the type of multiculturalism they choose to have through various policies and socialization, but from gauging Robin Cooks’ speech, this seems to be the goal.

Unfortunately, this has not been the pathway that the United Kingdom has taken and instead have created policies that have led to segregation.

Multiculturalism in policymaking in Britain is seen as the “dominant strand” in official approaches to diversity and difference in the United Kingdom (Gooby and Waite 2014). Previously the policy-making process focused primarily on assimilation and integration of minorities (Gooby and Waite 2014). Gooby and Waite argue that multicultural policies may segregate and erase social values (Gooby and Waite 2014 19). Gooby and Waite both draw on an argument that is supported by many other scholars. Examples of harmful outcomes of multicultural policies are discussed by Amir Ali and Gurharpal Singh speak about the 2001 riots in English industrial cities to show how these multicultural policies are performative and do not adequately help South Asian Britons. Ali argues that because of the multicultural policies in Britain throughout the decades that have not changed since the shift from assimilationist policies, there has been a neglect of the economic marginalization of Black and Asian ethnic minorities. “Such economically vulnerable sections have been completely neglected by this 'chicken tikka' variety of multiculturalism which is content to showcase Britain as a happy blend of so many diverse cultures and ethnic backgrounds” (Ali 2001 2821). While Ali wrote this paper in 2001, this remains true today as other scholars continue to write about it.

Pnina Werbner makes a provocative point concerning policies embracing multiculturalism. There are politicians such as former Prime Minister David Cameron who

believed policies embracing multiculturalism were problematic, but Werbner states that this is a scapegoat for politicians to be Islamophobic. “So that ‘culture’ becomes a euphemism for religion or community, entangles government ministers and opposition leaders alike in strange contradictions of which they seem entirely unaware” (2009, 30). Essentially, Werbner is stating that for politicians to effectively push anti-Muslim laws or policies in Britain, this is done by targeting the cultural groups that practice the faith such as Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, and Indians. This makes it much easier to keep the Muslims located in certain parts of the United Kingdom which today is evident with Muslim and South Asian heavy populated areas such as Tower Hamlets, Manchester, and Birmingham. Essentially, in the critique of multiculturalism, some politicians will create policies that may seem to create a community for those from a similar background when in reality it is to segregate them from society (Werbner 2009). Catherina Fieschi and Nick Johnson also speak on this point and instead they take it further by stating previously that South Asian communities previously were heavily oppressed and removed from society, but that due to the multicultural policies pushed by the Labour Party, they have become more involved in their communities (Fieschi and Johnson 2013). The common thread with all of these scholars is that they recognize that multiculturalism in the United Kingdom means something different to everyone. While the Labour Party may advocate for more political power and affordable housing for South Asians, the Conservative Party may push to break down segregated communities that they once advocated for to protect themselves from “mixing” with others due to their Islamophobia and fear of other cultures.

This analysis through this framework demonstrates that multiculturalism since the 1970s has changed culturally and politically (Parker 2000, 76). Before the 2000s, multiculturalism was not seen as a positive movement in Britain. There was the rejection of ethnic groups and there

was no celebration of their contributions. Many of the South Asian practices and food were not accepted until there was a new policy push from the Labour political party, which the foreign secretary Robin Cook belonged to (Buettner 866 2008). But this acceptance and enthusiasm in accepting a dish would have been unheard of decades ago when South Asians immigrated in such large masses after the Indian partition in 1947 (Buettner 2008). Stanley Fish in examining multiculturalism throughout the 1990s and 2000s said that the multiculturalism of ethnic restaurants was simply “superficial or a cosmetic relationship to the objects of its affection” instead of acceptance of the culture or the people themselves (Fish 1997, 378-379). This is a core point in determining what is cultural appropriation. The adoption of South Asian food became a celebration of simply the food, but as the data will demonstrate, there is no celebration of South Asians themselves. These South Asian Britons for decades remain deprived, segregated and removed from society.

This next set of scholars tie in together the discussion of British multiculturalism policies and cultural appropriation of the dish chicken tikka masala in Britain. Amir Ali in *Chicken Tikka Multiculturalism* writes in reference to how South Asians are treated as “It is obvious then that British multiculturalism suffers from a blind spot and also has a propensity for selective vision” (Ali 2001). He also states, “The colonial practices that it followed, most notably in the Indian subcontinent where it has been accused of following a strategy of 'divide and rule' are in fact a legacy that have been handed down to multiculturalism” (Ali 2001) These two points are essential to our understanding and also connect to the concepts discussed by scholars on British policies. The segregation and dismissal of South Asians while claiming the dish is performative as Ali argues (Ali 2001). But Ali is not alone in his argument. Since the adoption of chicken tikka masala in Britain, there have been more openings of South Asian restaurants selling

unauthentic South Asian dishes. As written by Phil Hubbard, hipsters in London are benefiting from this and opening their own restaurants with takes on the dish that are unauthentic but using it to their economic advantage (Hubbard 2016). In *“Going for an Indian”: South Asian Restaurants and the Limits of Multiculturalism in Britain*, Elizabeth Buettner states, “the of South Asian food’s rise to popularity reveals uneasy coexistence and tension between ongoing racism and exclusion” (Buettner 2008 868). She examines other minority ethnic groups' influence in food, the West India, Chinese, Italian and Afro-Caribbean cuisine and they have not significantly impacted the white British diet in comparison to South Asian curry (Buettner 2008). Chicken Tikka among other South Asian dishes are marketed throughout London and all of the UK as being a great representation of the South Asian population and their culture, yet most dishes consumed at these ethnic restaurants are not the same food that South Asians are eating (Buettner 2008). Buettner also states that calling “chicken tikka masala a true national dish raises a question of whether the British possessed the dish” from South Asian culture and claimed it as their own (2008 870). Ali and Buettner are very similar in their arguments as they both are directly stating that chicken tikka masala is a form of cultural appropriation, while Hubbard takes a milder approach.

Ben Highmore in *The Taj Mahal in the High Street* adds to this argument by examining the authenticity of the chicken tikka masala made in London and states that it is a form of cultural appropriation due to the lack of authenticity (Highmore 2009). While Indian food has been present in Britain for decades, it wasn’t until the declaration of the national dish that started the uptick in consumption and economic gain (Highmore 2009). Highmore states that most of the restaurants that do serve chicken tikka masala are more of a whitewashed version rather than an authentic dish, which with the ideas that Buettner and Ali state, alludes to the idea that the

British are appropriating the dish and gaining economically from it (Ali 2001; Buettner 2008; Highmore 2009). Highmore, Ali, Buettner, and Hubbard all collectively in their works argue that British multiculturalism policies have hurt South Asians and expose the inequalities that they face. They all at some level questioned the impact of the adoption of chicken tikka masala as the national dish of the United Kingdom and also reflect how South Asian Britons benefit. The views of the scholars reveal common themes that have also been found in British public opinion. The scholars in the literature critique British multiculturalism policies acknowledging the inequities that South Asian Britons face. They discuss the impact of colonialism which is also apparent among conversations that British citizens are having.

### **Methodology**

South Asian Britons are becoming more vocal about their placement in British society and are doing more to question the motives of British policies. While the “chicken tikka multiculturalism” has created an industry worth more than two billion dollars, they are unable to reap the benefits. A rise in social media and calls to address cultural appropriation has led to more discourse on various platforms discussing issues pertaining to ethnic communities. For my data collection, I analyzed more than 4,000 tweets from Twitter authored by individuals of various ages and ethnicities that came in response to a YouGov Poll. Using discourse analysis, a method focused on analyzing conversations between individuals, I focused on the conversations various twitter users had regarding the adoption of chicken tikka masala as the national dish of the United Kingdom. Using the literature on cultural appropriation and British multiculturalism as a lens, I analyzed the tweets to examine the profiles, what the tweets said, and the implications. I also viewed the tweets in context of the history of colonialism, experiences of Paki bashing and the current socio-economic situation of South Asian Britons. In order to

examine the claim that chicken tikka masala is a form of cultural appropriation that stemmed from past British policies, there must be an examination of the British public opinion to see what South Asian and white Britons believe because various personal accounts and beliefs will demonstrate the harmful impact of this adoption. Using my literature, in my analysis of the data, I sought to answer what Britons thought seeing one South Asian dish among all typical “English” dishes and how race affected the response of chicken tikka masala as a British dish. I aimed to see various opinions regarding this issue and to see if it was split by race or ethnicity. Cultural appropriation has two power elements: the group appropriating, and the group being appropriated (Dietler 2007). I wanted to see how race affected what these individuals said and if there are calls amongst British residents whether the adoption of chicken tikka masala is a form of cultural appropriation or not. This discourse among the various Twitter users demonstrates that there is a clear divide in opinion between white Britons and Britons of color along with their perspectives of the adoption of the dish and how they feel about it.

### **British Public Opinion on the UK National Dish**

At this point, it is clear that the adoption of chicken tikka masala as the national dish of the UK is a form of cultural appropriation. But there continues to be discourse and push back that is divided by race on the impact of the adoption of this South Asian dish and whether or not it is truly harmful to the South Asian Britain community. Understanding this is essential to showing that the United Kingdom continues their practices of colonialism from the times of colonization in British India. Other scholars have demonstrated that South Asians have been economically and socially disadvantaged, chicken tikka masala is being made and sold by white men and segregation is rampant in the UK. My work aligns with the work of the group of scholars who argue that British policies of multiculturalism are performative and the group of



scholars who state that chicken tikka masala is indeed a form of cultural appropriation because it aligns with both of the main arguments that the United Kingdom government is being performative in nature and the application of multicultural policies along with the adoption of chicken tikka masala has hurt the British South Asian community.

In this section I analyze Twitter threads through the lens of theories of cultural appropriation. The disputed origin of this dish shows us that there is a clear ethnic divide in the UK, debate on who belongs in the UK and in what ways and there are active conversations as to what having chicken tikka masala as the national dish means. As evident in the countless tweets on Twitter, South Asians feel that the adoption of this dish as a national dish does not represent the sentiment towards South Asians in the United Kingdom by white Britons? South Asians remain one of the poorest ethnic groups in Britain. They are neglected, yet their dish is declared as the United Kingdom's own. Here I analyze ongoing conversations on Twitter about whether or not Britons feel that this dish is a form of cultural appropriation.

The discourse on the Tweets are divided into three subsections: division of opinion based on race, colonialism and a false sense of multiculturalism. These Tweets are divided in these main themes because the large majority of these tweets fit into these categories. While analyzing these Tweets using discourse analysis, I found that there was a clear divide in the between based on race. Those who were South Asian or Black were much more critical of the United Kingdom's approach to multiculturalism policies and were upset that the British adopted chicken tikka masala as the national dish. White Britons were much more defensive and found that the adoption of this dish was great for the nation as many of the Tweets indicate and did not find the adoption of the dish to be a form of cultural appropriation. In addition to this category, I also analyzed Tweets that spoke about colonialism in which I found that many South Asian Britons

claimed the adoption of this dish was an extension of colonialism. And the final category were Tweets that spoke or alluded to a false sense of multiculturalism. Many South Asian Britons feel that their dish was appropriated and that this policy is simply hiding the United Kingdom's past. Overall, as I gathered my data, I found that there was a clear divide based upon ethnicity. White Britons were much more apathetic and defended the adoption of the dish, while South Asian Britons were united in taking a stance in critiquing the adoption and how British policies have affected their community.

Michael Dietler, Wenying Xu, Peter Balint and Patti Lenard all illuminate the data and support the argument that an adoption of food, but neglect of an ethnic group is harmful. Dietler argues that those who do adopt food from different cultures and call it their own, create an “embodied material culture” that is not truly theirs, but something to profit off of (Dietler 2007). A key point that addresses the reason and consequences of appropriation from the colonizers side is, “given the importance of consumption in constructing social relationships, it should not be surprising that goods, including especially food, have not only been appropriated and indigenized, but they have also been used by both parties in colonial situations to attempt to control the other making subjects by means of objects. This involves not only attempts to create novel desires for new goods but also attempts to get people to use imported objects in particular ways, as well as the belief that the use of particular goods or technologies will inherently induce certain kinds of desired behavior” (Dietler 2007 228). Throughout this section, Dietler will be the main theory on cultural appropriation that will provide a context to look at certain tweets.

Xu in her argument expresses that food from foreign countries introduced to white dominated countries tends to be appropriated and made incorrectly (Xu 2020) Balint and Lenard speak to how denying the prevalence of cultural appropriation is harmful to ethnic groups. “In

speaking to willingness to dismiss the claims made by minorities is consistent with the wave of anti-immigrant and anti-multicultural sentiment that is sweeping many democratic countries” (Balint and Lenard 2020). This is prevalent in the United Kingdom and connects to the argument of whether or not this dish is a form of chicken masala. Many tweets that will be examined are ones that deny the idea that chicken tikka masala is a form of cultural appropriation. In the lens of Balint and Lenard, this can lead to harmful and violent consequences, which is evident in the United Kingdom today with the high number of hate crimes against South Asians. Amir Ali, Elizabeth Buettner and Ben Highmore speak more directly to chicken tikka masala as the national dish in the UK and state that the living conditions and socioeconomic status of South Asians in London is further proof of how the adoption of this dish is performative multiculturalism. Concepts from these scholars advance the argument that the adoption of chicken tikka masala is a form of cultural appropriation and an extension of colonialism.

I begin with a popular tweet from YouGov that received thousands of responses. Most of these responses were about how chicken tikka should not be considered the UK dish. Twitter is a forum where millions around the world feel free enough to vocalize honest and true opinions. One viral Tweet will be the center of this paper. The main tweet that received thousands of responses, likes, and retweets was a photo from the YouGov Twitter of rankings of British food with the question asking, “What are the best classic British foods (savory)?” With “God Tier” being the top with foods like Yorkshire pudding, Sunday roast, fish and chips, crumpets, full English breakfast, and Bacon Sandwich. In the “mid-tier,” there are foods like “toad in the hole,” cauliflower cheese, Cornish patty, pie and mash, chicken tikka masala, Ploughman’s lunch, and Welsh rarebit. The person who tweeted this screenshotted this graphic and then posted it on Twitter along with the message claiming British food was depressing. But what was interesting

was that all the foods were the “traditional” British foods, but chicken tikka masala was included in the survey as being a “classic British food.” This tweet got 73,400 likes along with 15,000 retweets and 3,365 comments, most of them having to do with the origin of the dish and the relationship to colonialism.

### *Division of Opinion Based on Race*

The discourse between Twitter users demonstrates whether chicken tikka masala is a British dish or not is contested and the lines of debate fall along racial and ethnic lines. In the United Kingdom among politicians, there is already a debate on the origin of this dish. On recipe websites, the authors will mention various cities as being the home for the dish. But the British politicians all agree on one thing regardless of the city it was founded in: the dish originated in the United Kingdom making it British. While this decision is unanimous for British politicians, there is much division among the British public as indicated on Twitter. Following the original YouGov thread, another Twitter user in response to the main YouGov Tweet writes

*“Chicken Tikka masala is the best thing on this list, and they put it mid-tier.”*

While this Tweet did not have anything directly about the conflict surrounding chicken tikka masala, it received comments that referred to the origin of the dish. This received comments with

*@mmm\_kantaloupe saying, “Classic British cuisine, Chicken Tikka Masala.”*



This was then followed up with a comment with a South Asian woman @ningshihos (evident from her name and profile photo) stating,

*“It’s not even British food it’s Indian food” (Twitter).*

This tweet got more than 1,000 likes, but then a person responding to it stated, “It’s Scottish.” This then led to another user responding by saying,

*“No it’s not it was invented in the UK.”*

This other man @joshuan542 then wrote *“It’s not Indian food at all...”* This was then countered with a person writing *“It’s Scottish.”* This was the same person who stated that chicken tikka masala is Scottish. This same user then reiterated and stated, *“Was invented in Glasgow.”*

This is a key interaction that demonstrates the conflict among British people regarding where chicken tikka masala comes from and the intersecting national identities. Without knowing the origin of the dish, the case made for chicken tikka masala as the British national dish being a form of cultural appropriation is weak. But no one is certain of where chicken tikka masala was originally made. Was it made in Bangladesh, India, Britain, or Scotland? This is what these few Tweeters discuss in response to this tweet. @ningshihos wrote from the perspective of a South Asian woman declaring the dish is Indian, but a white man then responded stating that the dish originated in the United Kingdom, making a point that it is British. Then another white man tweeted stating chicken tikka masala originated in Scotland. While there are immigrants from a nation that may influence the general population in their culture, it is not realistic nor acceptable to have the host country claim the dish. As Xu writes in *Eating Identities*, ethnic food consumption contributes to the construction of social relationships and that this in turn leads to

the ethnic group to be perceived as “less than” (Xu 2020). These ethnic groups may be dismissed or alienated, while the host country will benefit from the hierarchical relationship created. There has been such a lack of analysis of where the dish has originated and negating arguments that it is purely South Asians hurts the ethnic group as a whole by denying them their equality within a nation (Xu 2020). As these Tweets demonstrate, there is a clear power struggle. South Asian Britons feel strongly that this dish is theirs and it originates from one of the South Asian nations, but other white Britons belittle their views and do not care to understand their points. This ethnic community is seen as “less than” and there is this continuous hierarchical relationship as Xu articulates. While this is in regards to a dish, the white Britons are the ones that have the power to declare this dish as their own and have seemingly erased the history and identity of what white Britons have done to the South Asian community.

### *Colonialism*

The discourse among Twitter users demonstrates that the insistence of chicken tikka masala as being a British dish is reminiscent of colonial discourses and processes. Again, there is this clear divide between races. Twitter makes it accessible for any individual to review a public profile and from examining photos and information, it becomes clear what race and ethnicity a Twitter user belongs to. South Asian Britons comment in this thread on how the adoption of this dish is an extension of colonialism.

One direct response to the original YouGov tweet was,

*@Mirysi writes “Chicken tikka masala is an Indian dish...how is over here in mid-tier to begin with...old habits die hard it seems” (Twitter).*

This user seems to be alluding to the past colonial history in India with this Tweet when she says, “old habits die hard.” This Twitter user, as learned from examining her profile, is a South Asian British woman. She was stating that she did not think that the dish belonged on the list and also questioned how the dish was rated poorly as well. As she ends with saying “old habits die hard,” she is making the point that the British today are continuing their past colonialist ways and the naming of chicken tikka masala as the national dish is a prime example of modern-day colonialism. Amir Ali, in his paper *Chicken Tikka Multiculturalism* states, “The colonial practices that it followed, most notably in the Indian subcontinent where it has been accused of following a strategy of 'divide and rule' are in fact a legacy that have been handed down to multiculturalism” (Ali 2020). His argument throughout his paper gives a context in which this tweet can be seen as a reference to past colonialism. Ali links the practices of past colonialism to today in the United Kingdom where chicken tikka masala is the proclaimed national dish. There are a few things that Ali is alluding to, but it all ties in together. Since mass migration into the United Kingdom from the South Asian subcontinent, there has been this “divide and conquer” reminiscence from the United Kingdom government. Governments, both Labour and Tory, have made it difficult throughout the decade for adequate housing which has led to South Asians concentrated in poor, poorly funded, and torn down neighborhoods. As @Mirysi says “old habits die hard,” looking at this tweet with Ali’s theory makes clear that the United Kingdom has had practices of economically benefiting and tearing apart groups and continues to do the same with the adoption of this dish which has given them great benefit. This industry of South Asian food that has been glorified and declared British is a two billion dollar industry, contributing a great amount to the British economy (Highmore 2009). This economic benefit is similar to when the British colonized India because they were able to gain their spices and other resources that

benefited their economy and led to their prosperous nation. As many members of the British South Asian say throughout the thread, the adoption of this dish is a repetition of their past colonial practices.

### *False Sense of Multiculturalism*

The British national dish promotes an illusion of British multiculturalism that neglects the reality of equality and discrimination apparent in society. It is evident that there is a divide in this Twitter thread between South Asian Britons and white Britons. Reading the thousands of responses, those who are questioning the authenticity of chicken tikka masala and being critical are solely South Asians while white Britons remain on the defense.

*@yrgirlkv states, “so like not to be desi about this but, uh, since when is chicken tikka masala a classic/British/food?”*

“Desi” is a common term used by South Asians to describe themselves. A desi is someone who is South Asian, but this term is mostly used from “desis” themselves. Due to this one single word, it does not take much to know for certain that this Twitter user is South Asian, but her profile backs this claim.

*A white male @biggreenfirst responds, “british culture is the reflection of a history of colonial violence. that said, to exclude themselves the creative/artistic/culinary accomplishments of diaspora/immigrant communities as not “British” feels like it could easily feed into whitewashed views of the modern uk cultural landscape.”*

@biggreenfirst’s tweet puts the past of colonialism and today’s multiculturalism together in his response. In his tweet, essentially he is stating that British culture is a reflection of its post-



colonial past, so therefore, by denying that chicken tikka masala is British national dish, it would be denying the diaspora. Dietler's theory on cultural appropriation would declare that this statement would align with the views of the person and/or nation that is appropriating a culture. Dietler claims that the appropriation and adoption of ethnic food has led to a false sense of multiculturalism in majority white nations (Dietler 2007). It is evident that this white male Briton holds the same opinion as British politicians in his country. But by claiming this dish as their own, falsely implies that there is flourishing multiculturalism and the acceptance and celebration of South Asians in the United Kingdom. While the United Kingdom does have a relatively diverse population, the adoption of this dish simply because Britain colonized India is performative and cultural appropriation. The British have continued past practices of colonialism from taking spices and materials that they desired to the present day of adoption of South Asian food while disregarding the South Asian population.

@yrgirlkv as a South Asian British woman asks a question that has been asked by many on the authenticity of the dish and how it came to be a "British" dish. But the response from a white man is completely different from the hundreds of others regarding the origin of the dish. @biggreenfirst writes a lot in a matter of a sentence that must be broken down. First, he states that British culture is a reflection of colonial violence. This mirrors the points made by Dietler throughout his book on how cultural appropriation occurs and while this Tweeter does not explicitly mention cultural appropriation, using Dietler's framework, it is possible that is what @biggreenfirst was alluding to. But what is interesting is that Britain has colonized many countries around the world, yet the only dish that they claim as their own is chicken tikka masala. While this is a completely different question, it is questionable as to why it is a South

Asian dish that has been declared as the national dish of Britain. But @biggreenfirst thinks that due to the colonial past of Britain, that this could be one explanation.

The second part of @biggreenfirst's Tweet is a bit more complex and difficult to break down. He states, "that said, to exclude themselves the creative/artistic/culinary accomplishments of diaspora/immigrant communities as not "British" feels like it could easily feed into whitewashed views of the modern uk cultural landscape." Here it seems to be that this Twitter user is saying that by Britain not taking part of the "creative/artistic/culinary accomplishments" of ethnic communities that it would feed into the idea that Britain is white today and be hurtful since it would feed into the "whitewashed views." This is interesting because he seems to be agreeing to the past of Britain and the impact of colonialism, but also seems to be defending this claim of a South Asian dish in the name of feeding into a whitewashed idea of Britain. At first glance it seems that this white Briton was different from how the other white Tweeters responded, but he is also defending the actions of Britain without recognizing the harm.

Looking at this Tweet through the lens of Dietler, it is evident that @biggreenfirst is trying to defend the idea of having chicken tikka masala as the national dish, but in a different way from how the white Britons did. As Dietler says, adoption/indigenization of ethnic dishes by a powerful nation is something that is very common to colonial situations which supports the first half of @biggreenfirst's point. "Culture is constructed through consumption. This process of cultural construction through consumption implies two things. In the first place, "objects 'materialize' cultural order—they render abstract cultural categories visible and durable; they aid the negotiation of social interaction in various ways, and they structure perception of the social world. The "systems of objects" that people construct through consumption serve both to inculcate personal identity and to enable people to locate others within social fields through the

perception of embodied tastes and various indexical forms of symbolic capital” (Dietler 2007 225). Dietler highlights two concepts. He mentions how culture is constructed through consumption. This is what @biggreenfirst is saying in his first half of his Tweet. Consuming this dish as he states is how there is this new multicultural society in the United Kingdom.

In another Tweet, someone states,

*“how is chicken tikka masala a classic British food?!?!?!?”*

and this receives two responses.

*@Feetfee says “Haven’t you realised yet that Britain didn’t just colonise land, they colonised menus too?”*

*Another Tweeter said, “It’s called cultural appropriation bro.”*

Out of the thousands of Tweets, this was the first time someone called the adoption of chicken tikka masala as a form of cultural appropriation. @Feetfee, a Black Briton makes the point that Britain colonizes land and menus, referring to the South Asian dish and the other Twitter user outright stated that this was a form of cultural appropriation. This tweet is interesting because it is similar to @biggreenfirst’s point of Britain colonizing lands all over the globe and coming out with some economic gain, in this tweet, @Feetfee makes the point to say that since that they previously colonized land, it is not unusual to think that the United Kingdom colonized menus as well. The same conflict is evident here with a white Briton versus a Briton of color disputing the origin of the dish. Using Ali’s theory to contextualize this tweet, it is possible to see that this argument and debate is one where white Britons remain on one side and South Asians and other ethnicities remain on the other. Throughout the entire Twitter thread this is evident, and it is clear

that many White Britons do not see the gravity of this issue. As Dietler and Xu write, there are great disparities among ethnic minorities, and it tends to lead to ethnic voices being drowned out. South Asians in Britain for decades have been the least educated, have low English literacy rates, get paid the lowest wages, live in relatively poor housing, and are overall neglected.

### **The Future of Chicken Tikka Multiculturalism**

Chicken tikka masala multiculturalism is superficial. The adoption of this dish has not benefitted the South Asians. Instead, it has given a false sense of acceptance to white Britons and the Government that they are doing an effective job at welcoming different ethnic groups when in reality they are simply enjoying the pleasures that various cultures have while rejecting the communities themselves. As mentioned in the introduction, Robin Cook's belief was that the adoption of chicken tikka masala as the national dish would be an addition to multiculturalism policy making and "coming to terms with multiculturalism as a positive force for our economy and society will have significant implications for our understanding of Britishness" (The Guardian). And while this adoption has been a great positive force for the economy and a good way to frame the United Kingdom has a multicultural nation, it has failed the South Asian population.

As we navigated throughout this paper, the United Kingdom has perpetuated violence against the South Asian community for centuries. From their violent colonization to the United Kingdom so abruptly divided the land in the creation of two nations catering to two religious groups leading to mass migration and murder, to the current day silent violence. While the white Britons here this dish there is still the racist sentiment continued throughout the later decades, which led South Asians to be called "smelly" and "dirty" throughout the United Kingdom that still continues today. South Asians live in the poorest neighborhoods because that is the only

housing they can afford in cities like London. Tower Hamlets has the highest concentration of Bengalis and is also in the poorest borough of London (Jaspal 2015). This borough is mostly populated by unskilled South Asian migrant workers. Because of this economic disadvantage, Bengalis in Tower Hamlets are constantly struggling to make ends meet and find themselves living in the same run-down flats for decades (Glynn 2010). Yet boroughs such as Tower Hamlets are now known as “Curry Capitals.”

For decades, the South Asian Britons have experienced racism, Islamophobia and “Paki Bashing.” As indicated in the last report with data collected from 2019-2020, the most vulnerable racial group that suffered the most hate crimes in the UK are Muslims (United Kingdom 2019-2020 Report). These South Asian Britons have the lowest literacy rates, live in poor housing, get paid the lowest wages, have the lowest education rates and also experience the most hate crimes. While British politicians have aimed to create multiculturalism policies in hopes of creating unity and bringing in people from other cultures, they have instead ignored the real problem and neglect the South Asian individuals themselves.

As was articulated in the literature section, there are key points as to what the difference is between appropriation and appreciation of a certain dish, item, or piece of clothing from a different culture other than one’s own. While Dietler and Xu speak about the link between ethnic foods and appropriation from nations that the food does not belong to, Peter Balint and Patti Lenard speak to how denying the prevalence of cultural appropriation is harmful to ethnic groups. There was also a brief overview of literature on multicultural policies and how this is the dominant strand in policy making in the United Kingdom. Multicultural policies include policies on language, education, immigration, and religious freedom. This discussion of Britain’s “multiculturalism” usually references the demographics, but multiculturalism is a “succession of

conscious efforts to make sense of, and manage, ethnically diverse communities at the local and national levels” (Buettner 2000 868). As Robin Cook, addressed in his speech his aim was to bring ethnic diverse groups together and this declaration created more interest in South Asian food, this was something that South Asians benefitted from.

As we learned, the British public opinion is clearly divided based on the ethnicity of the tweeter. The discourse on the Tweets were divided into three subsections: division of opinion based on race, colonialism and a false sense of multiculturalism. These Tweets are divided in these main themes because the large majority of these tweets fit into these categories. We found that South Asian Britons felt strongly that the adoption of chicken tikka masala was a form of cultural appropriation and an extension of colonialism. White Britons very clearly disagreed with this point and stated the adoption of chicken tikka masala is a good policy for various cultures.

But who benefits from this two billion dollar industry? While the intent from Robin Cook and other politicians was to invite South Asian culture into the United Kingdom, this declaration ignored the real problem. While the United Kingdom celebrating this dish, very few South Asians are able to reap the benefit. This form of multicultural nationalism erases the damages done by colonialism and the adoption of this dish is one example. The South Asian community in Britain still remains deprived and there have yet to be effective policies to address this issue. Cultural appropriation is rampant around the world especially in the “West.” But what more people should recognize—not just people of color--- is that there is an incredibly problematic dynamic in the United Kingdom rooted in past colonialist practices and the United Kingdom should rectify their past sins instead brushing them away.

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